



Careers in social work: Outlook, pay, and more

Elka Torpey | March 2018

Mary Green always knew that she wanted a job helping others. During her first year of college, she figured out what that career field would be: social work.

Over the years, Green has been a social worker for a nonprofit organization, a social services department, and a school. “It’s a versatile career,” says Green. “There are lots of different types of jobs.”

Keep reading to learn about the diversity of social work careers. Through the lens of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, you’ll see whether becoming a social worker might be right for you.



A helping occupation

Social workers help people cope with everyday problems. They may provide services such as advocacy, crisis response, and connecting clients with resources.

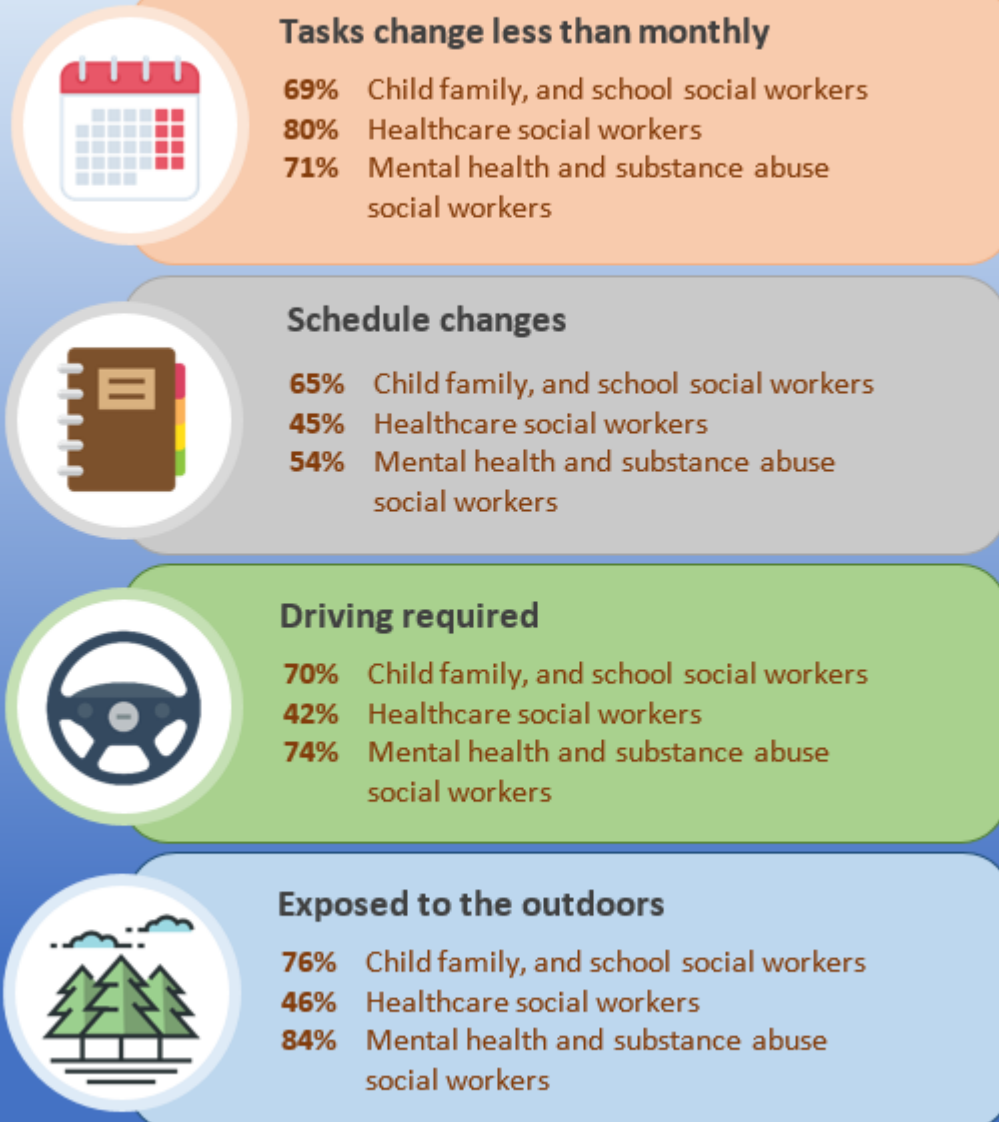
BLS groups social workers into four types:

- Child, family, and school
- Healthcare
- Mental health and substance abuse
- All other social workers

Regardless of specialty, social work focuses on the individual in his or her own environment. Zach Landau, whose current job is with a social services call center, has also worked with children and families and with people who have mental health or substance abuse issues. “There are specific nuances, depending on the area of social work you’re in,” he says. “But I’ve been surprised at how much overlap there is.”

BLS data offer insight into some of these job similarities and differences. Table 1 shows selected physical requirements, cognitive demands, and environmental conditions for three of the four types of social workers in 2017.

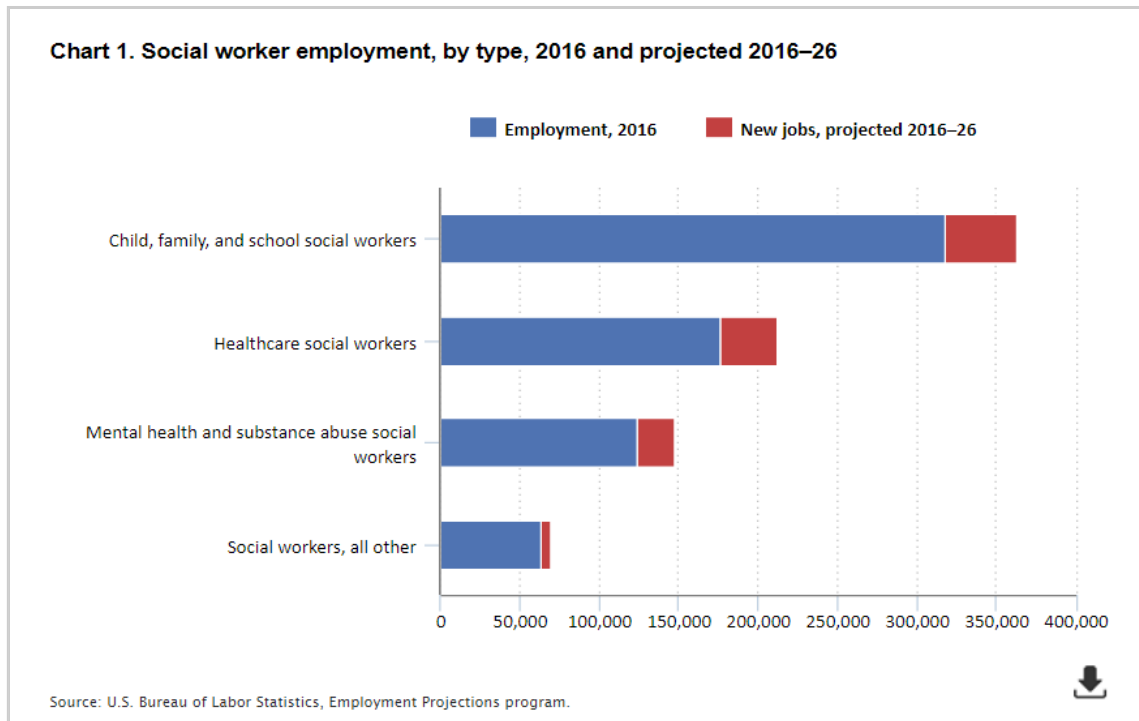
Table 1. Percentage of social workers with selected physical requirements, cognitive demands, and environmental conditions, 2017



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Requirements Survey.

Employment and outlook

In 2016, there were more than 680,000 social workers employed in the United States. As chart 1 shows, the largest number of them specialized in helping children and families or worked in schools. The smallest number worked in the “all other” occupation, which includes job titles such as criminal justice social worker and forensic social worker.



Projected new jobs

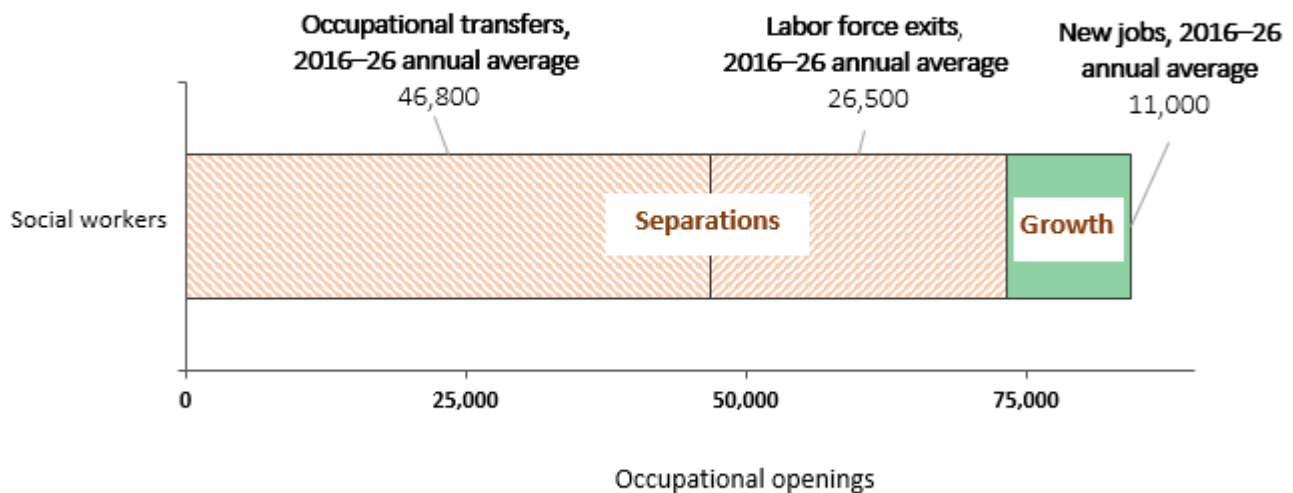
By 2026, the number of social workers is projected to increase to more than 790,000. The red portion of the bars in chart 1 shows the number of new jobs projected to arise from 2016 to 2026. Over the decade, the occupation of child, family, and school social workers is projected to add the most jobs—about 45,000 of them.

The expected addition of 109,700 jobs overall demonstrates a 16-percent growth rate—more than double the 7-percent employment growth projected for all occupations from 2016 to 2026. Rates vary by specialty, but only the “all other” occupation is projected to have average growth (8 percent); employment growth in each of the others is expected to be much faster than the average.

Occupational separations

Thousands of new job openings are projected from employment growth; however, most openings for social workers are expected to arise from separations—that is, when people leave the occupation to work in another occupation or to exit the labor force. (See chart 2.)

Chart 2. Occupational openings for social workers, by source of opening, projected 2016–26 annual average



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program.

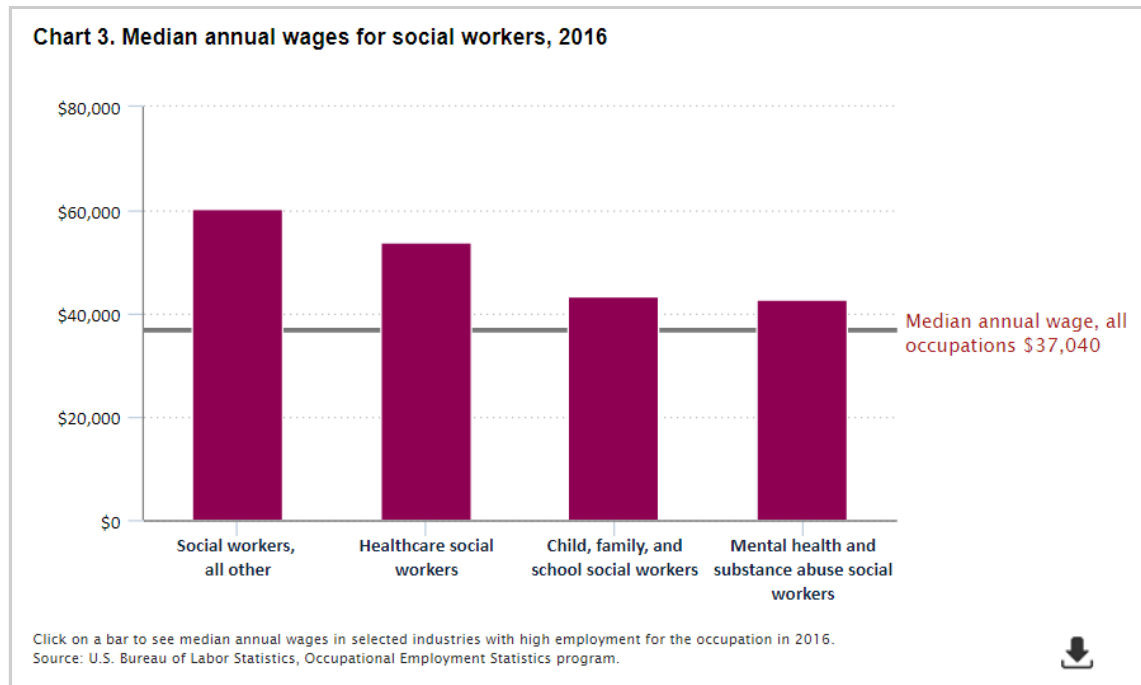
About one-third of the 73,300 social worker separations projected each year, on average, over the 2016–26 decade are expected to be from people leaving the labor force, such as to retire. But the bulk of separations are projected to arise from people transferring out of social work to other occupations.

That’s no surprise to workers currently in the field. Social workers deal with people who have had hardships or trauma in their lives, and experiencing this secondhand can take a toll. “People burn out,” says Green. “It just gets too difficult.”

Landau agrees. “You’re working with people who have all kinds of complex issues,” he says. “Even if something didn’t happen to you, you feel what they’re feeling.”

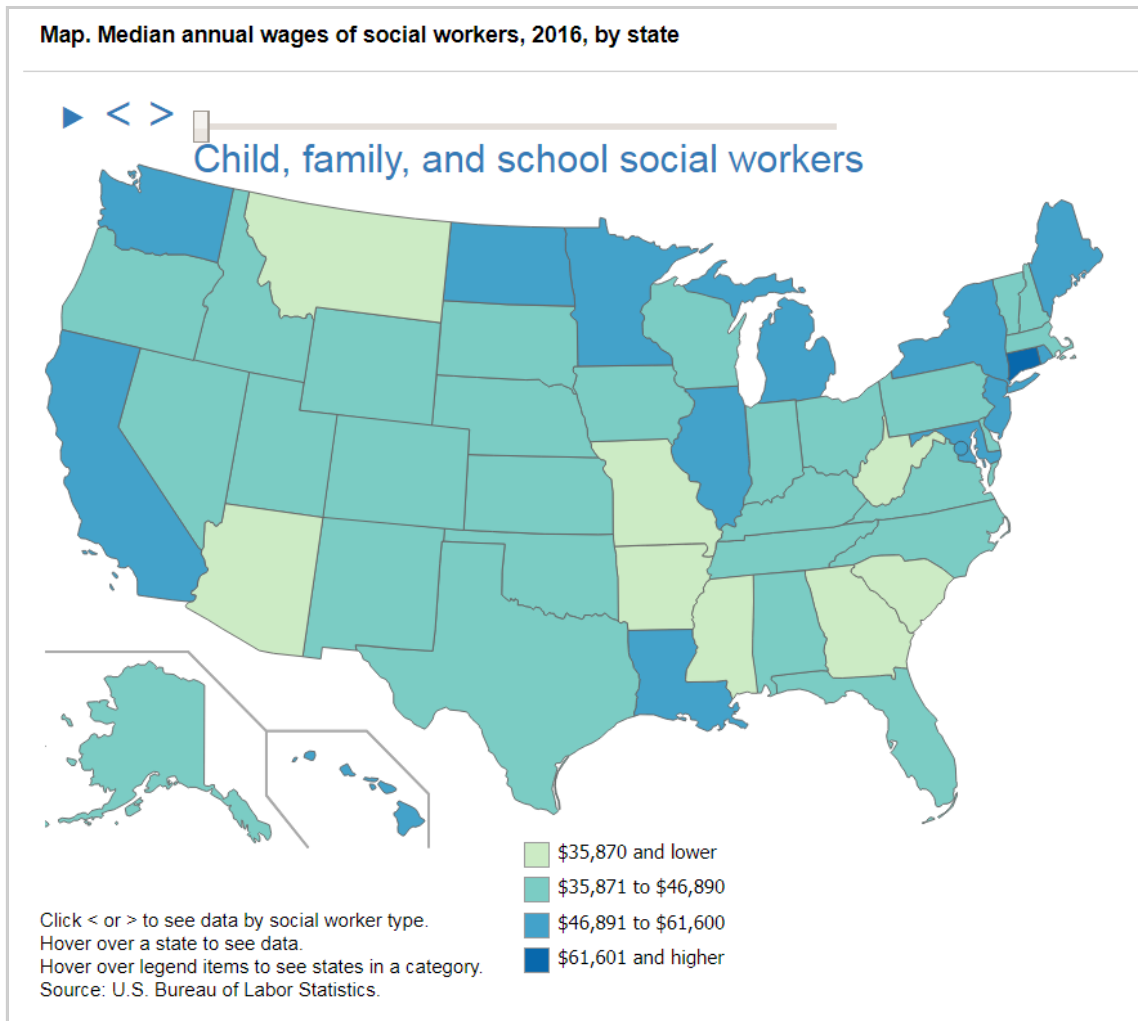
Pay

Social workers had a median annual wage of \$46,890, higher than the \$37,040 wage for all workers in 2016. Chart 3 shows how wages vary by social worker occupation. These data are for wage and salary workers only and do not include the 2 percent of social workers who were self-employed.



A number of factors affect wages in an occupation, including industry and geographic location. Click on a bar in chart 3 to see median annual wages in selected industries with high employment for each social worker occupation.

The map shows how pay varies by state. For example, the \$66,550 wage for mental health and substance abuse social workers in New Jersey was the highest for that occupation nationwide—and more than double the \$31,240 wage for those in Oklahoma, the lowest paid.



Preparing for a career

Social workers typically must have a bachelor's or master's degree to enter the occupation. They also may need other credentials, such as a state-issued license or certification, depending on the state and the job. For example, in Wisconsin, where Green works, school social workers must be licensed; licensure requires a master's degree that includes specific coursework and a practicum.

Table 2 highlights the percentage of social workers requiring at least a master's degree, a license, or prior work experience in 2017, according to BLS.

Table 2. Percentage of social workers with selected education, training, and experience requirements, 2017



Minimum education level of a master's degree required

21%	Child, family, and school social workers
55%	Healthcare social workers
30%	Mental health and substance abuse social workers



License required

23%	Child, family, and school social workers
90%	Healthcare social workers
¹	Mental health and substance abuse social workers



Prior work experience required

65%	Child, family, and school social workers
57%	Healthcare social workers
67%	Mental health and substance abuse social workers

¹ Licensing data not available. However, about 61 percent of mental health and substance abuse social workers needed some form of pre-employment training, which includes licenses.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Requirements Survey.

Although Landau doesn't need a graduate degree for his current job, he's enrolled in a social work master's program. He plans to become a licensed clinical social worker, a credential that he hopes will broaden his career options for helping others. "It's one thing to say you want to make the world a better place, but it's another to be in the trenches and see people make changes," says Landau. "It's challenging, but it's also very rewarding to see the outcome of the work that you do."

For more information

Find additional information about [social workers](#) and other [community and social service occupations](#), as well as hundreds of others, in the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) (OOH). For each occupation, OOH profiles describe what workers do, what the job outlook is, how much the pay is, and more.

Data on job-related requirements for social workers are available from the BLS [Occupational Requirements Survey](#) program. Detailed employment and wage data—including by industry, state, and local area—are available from the BLS [Occupational Employment Statistics](#) program.

Visit your state occupational licensing department for specific information on required credentials. A state-by-state licensure guide is available at [SocialWorkLicensure.org](https://socialworklicensure.org).

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